

Queen of Thought

Chapter One

The familiar ancient tree boughs whisked by as she stalked her prey in silence, thanks to her elfin warrior training. She paused, well-balanced on a branch, nocked an arrow to her shortbow's string, and focused her thermal vision in the dim moonlight. The rabbit's red and yellow heat signature burned in the night, and she pulled the bowstring to her cheek. She drew a deep breath to steady her weapon.

"You know that I blame you for any trouble I get into, right?"

The rabbit bolted from its bush in flight.

The elfin warrior's eyes flared in anger, but she kept silent. *There goes dinner.*

She slacked her bow and crouched on the branch, sword hilt shifting along her ribs. The men's heat signatures dimmed as she suppressed thermal vision from her magical barrette; she wanted a better look at their features in the dark.

Fighting men, Sheree realized as she glimpsed their light leather armor.

"Kamar, you idiot, keep it down," whispered the second man, whose dark oiled hair glinted above human ears in the stark light. They each led a well-built horse; she was surprised she hadn't heard them coming. Kamar led on the wrong side of his horse so that the two humans walked alongside one other. His horse didn't seem to mind; she'd wager it was well-trained.

"Just saying, Chet." Kamar shrugged.

The other man sighed in irritation. "Obviously. Now keep your trap shut."

There was a slight pause before Kamar replied, "Sure," as though he had considered and approved the suggestion.

Sheree saw Chet's free hand curl into a fist, but he continued to walk down the choked forest path. She must have been utterly engrossed by that rabbit to not have heard them. Well, she *was* pretty hungry.

Her attention turned to Kamar. His dark hair appeared kempt, as did his person. Something about Kamar's angular jaw and the slight tilt of an eyebrow tickled the back of her memory. She examined his tall build with a keen eye, but she couldn't place him. He seemed a bit dreamy – perhaps

oblivious, his thoughts elsewhere as his eyes moved about – but he was well muscled. She would have expected his half-moon axe on a stockier person, but it looked second nature on his hip. She caught a sparkle on Kamar’s jerkin in the low silvery light, and noted the insignia of a Lartan captain.

Chet, his stockier companion, sported more muscle, but would fight with less agility. He moved like the kind of man who knew how to use his sword. She thought she caught a slight glitter on its hilt. Despite the lack of insignia, his authority over Kamar was clear.

One of Queen Sarsetta’s soldiers acting as his escort? Why weren’t they announced at the forest’s edge?

The Elven Warriors of the Forest of Haunts were seeing far more traffic of late. Their own numbers dwindled at this outpost, and they had abandoned the guard wall that divided the human lands from the Forest of Haunts. There wasn’t as much traffic as there might have been, though; an understandable amount of superstition surrounded the forest.

Though that is the draw for some.

She sighed inwardly and slung her bow over her shoulder; she couldn’t let them roam her patrol zone unattended. When foreigners came unannounced, Sheree preferred to follow them awhile and gather a little information before confronting them. They weren’t really the type to tell you the truth if you just asked. She glided after them amid the tangled foliage of the trees.

This was the only forest in which the trees emitted a low heat signature, which meant she didn’t have to concentrate to combine her normal vision and thermal vision in order to avoid branches while she tracked at night. It was one of the many reasons she loved it so. She let her thermal vision take precedence and tracked the red and yellow images amid the blue trees. Like she had with that rabbit her mouth still watered over in regret.

They had chosen a narrow little-used path and walked as close to the edges as possible. The sensible thing would have been to walk single file, but neither took the lead. Despite the tight fit, Kamar still seemed to wander.

“Hey Chet, I was wondering-“

“Shhhh!” Chet shushed angrily. “Are you *trying* to get us killed? No talking ‘til we get to the old codger’s, remember?” Chet seemed anxious to move forward and didn’t break stride.

Kamar, however, stopped short and lifted his chin a bit as though affronted. His horse obediently stopped beside him. Sheree blended her two types of vision and thought his wide, oblivious eyes narrowed.

“Well, if anyone *was* trying to kill us, you’d be helping,” he grumbled as he began to walk again. “*You* just gave away our destination.”

Chet dropped his reins and whirled around to grab Kamar by the throat with a huge hand. His horse stopped, and Sheree froze in mid-step, her elfin trained balance holding her still on the thinner branch. Kamar’s horse nickered and moved his head around the soldier to look at Chet. The shorter Chet strained to reach high enough to push Kamar off the ground and failed. Sheree settled her other foot on the branch with an amused smile.

“If you say one more word, I swear I’ll get that old codger’s fairies to cut out your tongue – or I could just do it myself...” Chet threatened, leaning close to Kamar’s face.

Sheree noted a slight temperature change in Kamar’s chin - likely from Chet’s hot breath before he shook his head emphatically, the whites of his eyes blurring in a line.

Chet released him and snatched his horse’s reins to stomp down the trail. Kamar coughed a bit as he took a moment to regain his breath. Then he dusted himself off, straightened his shoulders, and followed without taking his horse’s reins. The animal attended him.

Sheree puzzled over their ready enmity. They posed several questions that they wouldn’t want to answer intentionally. Now that she knew where they were headed, it would be easy to follow, but she had been on patrol for three weeks and this was to have been her last day. She was out of provisions, hungry, tired, and now she would probably have to babysit them for another couple days on their journey to the “old codger’s.”

It did make a little more sense now why they hadn’t been announced. Some of the “codger’s” guests knew the forest rather well. Though they generally weren’t human.

* * *

Kamar waited a bit after Chet had grabbed his throat. Doing too many things to irritate Chet in quick succession wasn’t a good idea, but he needed to make sure that Chet didn’t suspect anything. Treason was a serious accusation – especially against General Chetin – and he didn’t want to make it until he was sure. The fabled “First Nymph” – better known as the “Fairy

King” – would be able to tell whether or not Chet was loyal to Queen Sarsetta. The fact that Chet had responded to the “old codger’s” summons without telling the Queen seemed to confirm Kam’s suspicions, but he would wait for the nymph’s verdict.

One of the elves should have caught on to their presence by now. Still, he liked to know if he was being followed.

Kam walked alongside Chet for another few minutes, then picked up a rock and hurled it at a tree in feigned boredom. He kept an innocent look on his face. *That should do the trick.*

Chet darted a glare at Kam and his eyes narrowed at the innocent look.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“I heard a thud,” Chet growled. “That wasn’t you?”

Kam shrugged. “I didn’t hear it.” His wandering eyes seemed to explain why.

Chet sucked in a breath and murmured something about the Forest of Haunts. Kam pretended not to hear.

A wind rustled the dead leaves on the forest floor about a hundred feet ahead, its sound magnified by the silence. Chet took a defensive stance, pulled his sword from its sheath and faced the leaves. Kam twisted a fist on Rage’s chestnut shoulder before he imitated his general and slid his axe from its belt loop. Rage understood the signal and the ear that had been turned toward their rear perked forward in readiness.

The wind picked up speed in a whirl. Glowing mist coalesced at the center and expanded to fully block their path. Kam squinted a little as the glow intensified to a glaring white.

“You idiot!” Chet yelled at Kam, the sound filling the immediate area, then falling dead among the growth.

Kam smiled inwardly. He had to admit that he enjoyed ticking Chet off. Besides, an elfin warrior should be right on queue.

* * *

Sheree seethed as she muttered an incantation to form a telepathic link with the spirit the tree had summoned. Her elfin magic rode the wings of her anger, and the sheer exhilaration of the magic exalted her soul. She bit the words of her spell off in crisp syllables, but kept her voice low.

A shrill, unearthly shriek sounded from the mist and she knew she had made contact even as she winced. She took a deep breath to rein in her anger, then focused on pairing her words with images that the spirit – a Lemros – could understand.

“Men-with-Fairy-King. Stand-down. ‘Dead’ trees, rock-not-affect.”

She sent an image of the “Fairy King” beside the men, followed by an image of her with her hand up in a gesture as if to say stop. For the last, it was more a series of images. Then men beside a normal tree – a “dead” tree – succeeded by a rock hitting the tree, then a sensation more than an image of “no harm done.” The “normal” trees in most other forests really weren’t dead, they just weren’t alive like these trees. “Dead” was just these living trees’ word for it.

Allow-passage. Fairy-King-handle-them. Images and sensations.

There was another piercing shriek and Sheree understood: *“Watch-men or die. Lemros-allow-passage.”*

Sheree sent the image of a nod. The Lemros shrieked again and its image imploded to a small point that disappeared into another plane. A hint of mist lingered in the air and settled to the ground with a last sigh and rustle of leaves.

Chet and Kamar looked at each other.

“Looks like the forest doesn’t like us here,” Kamar said.

Chet huffed. “Maybe it doesn’t like *you*.” He muttered a bit before giving Kamar a curt nod to move ahead. “You’re the one who knows your way around.”

Kamar obeyed, his axe at the ready. His horse followed with deliberate steps, as though each hoof-fall required precise balance.

“Just don’t hurt anymore trees,” Sheree whispered softly. The growth and crackle of their footsteps on the dead leaves covered her whisper.

Sheree crossed into the offended tree’s boughs and waited until they were further down the path. “They won’t do it again,” she said soothingly as she patted the rough bark of the tree.

The tree creaked softly as a limb sagged down to her like a relieved sigh. A glowing white bud formed with a low hum of rapid growth, then blossomed on the limb. Once open, the soft round petals revealed a hole where the pollen and seeds should have been. Sheree flicked her dagger across the very tip of her auburn braid and rubbed the tiny cut strands off her fingers into the hole. The flower closed around it. The tree would use the small amount of protein for energy. It wasn’t enough to really do anything,

but it was the gift she could give to make amends for the small offense. These trees were pretty touchy. The branch returned to its original position and more creaks ensued as the tree absorbed the bud into its bark.

Sheree flicked her dagger back into its sheath opposite her sword. These two were causing more trouble than most foreigners. She couldn't remember an instance when the Fairy King had summoned anyone this dense and ill prepared. Didn't they know *anything* about the Forest of Haunts? Hadn't they heard the stories? And Kamar was supposed to know his way around?

Unless Kamar did it on purpose. They are headed toward a clearing travelers can use as a campsite.

She shook her head. She needed more information. If Kamar *had* done it on purpose, then he knew she was there anyway and didn't seem to want Chet to know. If not, she could still learn more before making herself known. It wasn't her job to warn the "Fairy King" about his visitors, and she could always intervene if they overstepped their welcome. Further.

It was about a day and a half's ride to the Fairy King's palace. Well, if you knew where you were going. They weren't very far from the forest edge, and unless she missed her guess, they had made a push to get to that clearing. Tyros or not, they were headed that way.

Sheree took a deep breath and peered through the blue trunks. The men's heat signatures flickered among the trunks, and she saw two other small creatures nearby. She could be at ease about following them to a particular destination, but she was a bit anxious to find out what they were up to. There was a lookout above that clearing from which she could observe Chet and Kamar. She gathered her strength, then continued to follow them from the trees, almost matching the elves' agility.

It was only an hour before they reached the clearing. As she had suspected, the pair had headed straight for it and set up camp. She glided to one of the levels of platforms that the elves had erected in the massive trees just behind the clearing's edge. She had a small screen of branches, but she still needed to be careful. They were small platforms, but had enough space that she could lay out her blanket roll and set her pack down. She hadn't eaten since that morning; she had long since run out of her original food supplies, and poachers had kept her busy before she had gone hunting for that rabbit. She sighed. If she went hunting now, she might miss their conversation. She'd also have to cook what she caught and that would bring unwanted attention. It never tasted quite right when cooked with magic.

She settled down in her roll and let her eyes follow the trees up to the canopy where the moon's light peeked through the branches and let her mind wander.

This forest wasn't called the Forest of Haunts for nothing. Aside from the Lemros, the trees had their own sense of foreboding. The elves – and Sheree – were tolerated, rather than accepted. Even now, she could feel the tree shifting restlessly. She had never been on a boat, but she supposed it was akin to the feeling.

The trees didn't like people in general. When Sorceress Nonell had overwhelmed the elves in Elashta – the original name for the Forest of Haunts – the trees had devised their own way to oust the sorceress. She had cut them down, used them for experiments, and killed or enslaved the dryads who tended them. Sheree had heard stories about Elashta, once the most beautiful elfin forest. The dryads had tended the flora and lit the road with strange lights.

Eliriel, the Provisional Leader of the Elfin Warriors of the Forest of Haunts, owned the last dryad who lived in the forest now. Sheree smiled. She liked Zana. The dryad tended the flora at the palace and communed with one of the trees there. They were the most beautiful plants Sheree had ever seen, and Sheree liked to think that gave the observation at least some merit. Zana could even grow things in patterns like lacework without having to train them. The elves could, of course, grow them the same way with magic, but somehow the blooms the dryad grew seemed more brilliant, the petals softer, and the stems more supple. Sheree tried to imagine the way the forest might have been, might have looked. It was a loss that all the elves felt – they had been alive to see it – but the forest was still home.

About seven years ago, she had gone off to the human world in search of her identity. Her human parents had died when she was a baby, and as a teenager, she thought she would find her answers among her own race. She had learned many things – had even honed her fighting skills under the tutelage of a mercenary, and helped the woman unite the shattered human race to rise as their queen. Queen Sarsetta – Queen of Lartas, the neighboring nation – had a fledgeling kingdom, but she had done well for herself and the humans who lived there.

Sheree had enjoyed her time with Setta, the name the queen had gone by when as a mercenary. Setta had taught Sheree how to be more confident in her skills – both as a fighter and a magic-user. She had even taught Sheree a little of the way that the humans used magic, and Sheree was accepted as an

enchantress, if a bit less skilled at it than others. She had come to a place, though, when she realized that the human world didn't hold her answers any more than the elfin one did. Her full identity was a question she had to answer for herself.

Twenty-four years, she thought. She had learned and done a lot in that time compared to most, but there was so much more to learn. The elves retained vast amounts of knowledge and experience. Those in Sirien were far less quick to act than those in the Forest of Haunts. She supposed it was because the elves here faced a constant enemy. Still, she thought she'd adventure in the human world again some day.

She turned onto her side and peered down at the camp the two men had made. They didn't have a fire and they were close to the edge of the clearing. She pursed her lips. They hadn't ridden while in the forest, had entered at night, and didn't have a campfire. She couldn't tell if Kamar was trying to tell her he was there or not. She sighed. The men hadn't spoken while setting up camp and they were already in their bedrolls. She would have to wait for tomorrow.

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Sheree kept a firm hold on her frustration. She hadn't been able to determine much more about them over the next couple of days; the tight-lipped twits didn't talk much. Kamar seemed to be in his own little world, and Chet avoided him in general distate. They had taken to their horses now that they were a day into the forest where patrols would be far less frequent. There were few cities in the Forest of Haunts – if they could be called cities. It wasn't the most genial environment.

Kamar seemed a bit passive aggressive and she noticed that they often rode side-by-side, even while taking no notice of one another. Kamar did know his way around, though. They and the reason for their visit, however, remained a puzzle.

They had intersected another path about a half day back, and it had broadened to a road. She estimated the sun to be midway between its peak and the far horizon now. They were about an hour away from the "Fairy King's" tree and well into the territory he patrolled.

Sheree was just beginning to entertain the idea of walking behind them just to see how well she could hide in plain sight, when Chet's horse

stumbled. He cursed, and Kamar eyed him sideways, but the animal regained his footing and there was no further comment. They continued on as normal.

Sheree's hopes for something to disrupt the boredom rose. Her eyes narrowed. That was a well-trained and sure-footed horse. Why had he stumbled?

She dropped from her perch and stayed behind the tree's trunk. She might be stepping on the "Fairy King's" toes if she investigated and actually found something worthy of note within his territory. She pursed her lips.

What were the chances it was? The elves had been finding more of Nonell's spirit traps around the forest than usual of late. It could be nothing. She shrugged and waited for the men to move out of earshot. She was curious, and could always hand it over if it proved to be important.

Her leather shoes found the patches of wetter leaves so they wouldn't crunch as she strolled to the place the horse had tripped. A tiny black point protruded from the leaves. She yawned and knelt; it was better to appear casual. Her shoulders sagged as her fears were confirmed. She had uncovered an iron claw with a glistening black sphere in its grip. It was another spirit trap. A dim white light flickered inside; the trap had been sprung. A lemros was caught inside.

The powerful sorceress who had invented the trap was also responsible for the fall of the beautiful elfin province Elashta. Its recovery as the twisted Forest of Haunts brought fewer elves under the banner of her foremost enemy. Leader Tenemar Do'Rienen's lack of warriors to patrol the forest and defend its borders was probably Nonell's greatest weapon. All the while, her forces were increasing. Sheree had already apprehended a dark elf setting one of these traps in the past week, and a man dressed in the sorceress' black livery up to no good the week before.

So there's another spy. I hope it isn't a sprite. There's a nasty job for you.

The forest could not afford to lose many more lemros to Nonell. The "witch," as those who didn't understand the different forms of magic called her, had already grown too powerful despite the efforts of the elfin warriors – and the other few that battled her behind the scenes. The lemros were the best form of protection that this forest had, and Nonell's trapping was slowly killing the forest, not to mention the measure of protection the lemros granted the elves.

She could hand the trap over and inform the Fairy King – it *was* in his territory – but the elves weren't really sure that he would address the issue.

At least not the way it should be. She would bring it to Eliriel; the provisional leader could likely free it.

Despite the nymphs' unfavorable theology, Sheree sometimes found herself wishing that the trees hadn't driven most of the irresolute dryads away. The tree nymphs would have been better protection than the lemros, but since the dryads had refused to help oust Nonell in the manner that the trees had wanted, the trees had sought help from other sources. Tree sprites – those of the dryads who served Nonell – were difficult at best to remove from the forest. The stories that her mother told her about the dryads' capabilities had made her consider taking Zana along more than once. Zana was her dryad friend whom Eliriel “employed” at the Palace. In truth, no dryad would help another race unless they were slaves.

Hasn't this forest been through enough? Sheree asked herself. *I wish I could have a go at Nonell without her special magic. Blasted woman needs a good thrashing.*

Sheree grinned to herself, picturing the haughty sorceress being thrashed about like a child. She sighed, looking back down at the trap.

Not today.

Sheree carefully lifted the trap from its leafy hiding place, but noticed something strange in the way it felt before she could place it in her pack. It was... warmer.

Her green eyes narrowed as she tried to see into the sphere, focusing her thermal vision. Frowning at finding nothing unusual, she decided that it must be a warmth in spirit rather than a physical warmth. She smiled – as a human, she shouldn't have been able to tell. Apparently, her elfin training had paid off a bit. She placed her hand over the claw and opened her mouth to speak the words of magic that would enable her to examine the trap – but then she remembered Chet and Kamar. She had another duty first. Eliriel Do'Rienen – Leader Tenemar's wife – would be able to take care of it well enough. Sheree nestled the weighty object among the clothes in her pack.

Yet again, she took to the trees, following the scuffed and scattered leaves that the soldiers had disturbed. It wasn't much further down the trail that she heard the soldiers talking again – this time in whispers.

“Now stick by the plan and it'll be fine, alright?” Chet asked Kamar.

“Yeah, yeah,” Kamar replied. “I-I-I just need... um... can you remind me what the plan is?”

Sheree looked ahead and saw the clearing where the “Fairy King” lived. She leapt to the ground and hid behind a nearby bush to get a better view of the soldiers and the clearing ahead.

Chet’s voice was filled with urgency. “You walk out there with your axe handle towards the... house tree thing... and state your name. He’ll ask you what you’re doing here, you introduce me, and I’ll take over from there, okay?”

“Uh, yeah – yeah, right.” Kamar looked lost.

“Kamar. It’s not that hard.”

“Right.”

Sheree caught a muttered, “Sometimes I wonder why your tiny little brain doesn’t offset your battle prowess.”

Sheree covered her mouth with her hand, trying not to laugh. She watched in amusement from her hiding place as Kamar inched his way into the clearing.

The “Fairy King,” as the trees had nicknamed him, had lived in this forest when it had still borne the name Elashta and was lauded as the most beautiful and enchanting forest on the planet Katra. He had survived the attack when the sorceress Nonell finally amassed enough power to take the elfin province, and, in his own way, had helped the forest to oust her.

It was really the forest itself that had reclaimed its territory from Nonell, not the elves, though the cost had been high; the once beautiful forest was now strangled in appearance, and the trees that had once so freely given rest to strangers now exuded a rather foreboding presence. Even the elves had difficulty returning. The forest had lost all trust, and no longer welcomed them as caretakers, but tolerated their existence with a rather uneasy respect. As with all majorities, there were exceptions, and some among the trees – especially the younger ones – supported the elves, but they struggled with the older trees.

A single gigantic tree branched throughout the clearing at the trail’s end. The ground glowed with a wispy neon blue mist, and fairies flitted about the branches, glittering like pale stars in the strange light. Most of the branches were hollow to accommodate guest rooms, large halls, and intricate gardens. Some of the branches toward the trunk were large enough to fit people inside, while those toward the tips of the branches housed fairies. Sheree could see a garden inside one of the branches whose outer bark had been opened in a terrace style, the holes placed just where you could peek through the dark blue-green leaves. Sheree marveled at what the dryad’s

could do with a tree and keep it alive. However, it was the trunk of the tree that always drew her attention most.

Hollowed out in the trunk's base stood the throne room. Unlike the fairies' blue light, this room was warmly lit with the lamps that the dryads once used to light the roads at night. It was not unlike sunlight. The outside of the trunk that faced her was opened in a gothic A-frame and vines grew around its edge like dark green ribbon woven into wooden lace. This opening framed two thrones. The one on the right looked as though it had been blasted by the lightning of a mage's bolt. The place where the owner would normally sit lay empty, allowing a view of its smooth surface in contrast to the rest of the throne, whose wood reached out with pointed fingers in wooden sun rays. It was all one piece with the back of the tree. In contrast to the mangled throne beside it, the throne on the left looked as though someone had woven myriads of small and supple branches together. It didn't hold to any pattern, and wasn't anything like a woven basket – especially since it was also all one piece with the back of the tree. The overall effect made the throne seem exquisitely intricate, smooth, and inviting.

Sheree could barely contain her laughter as Kamar edged timidly toward the spectacle, proffering a shaking axe handle toward the throne on the right. She could see his silver-blue eyes filled with wonder as his dark brown hair glinted in the fairies' blue light.

Sheree noticed movement in the throne as Kamar edged forward. A ghostly figure surfaced from the depths of wood and soon materialized into a thin, old, and wizened nin (male nymph), whose frail figure hunched on the colossal throne. An aged crown dulled with time and altogether unremarkable, flattened his wispy white hair. His eyes were coated with a white film of blindness, but his gaze still held Kamar's figure under scrutiny. It didn't appear as though the old nin was pleased, and the soldier stuttered under the unsettling eyes.

“S-s-sir... er... uh... y-yer gra-grace... um... my name is, is, is uh, K-Kamar.”

The nin's hair stirred slightly in a nonexistent breeze, but not enough to reveal his ears. The colorless eyes continued to glare at the dumbfounded soldier standing before them. Kamar's mouth worked, but he couldn't seem to push any words through.

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Chet muttered beneath his breath and cautiously stepped out from among the trees, sword hilt pointed toward the dwarfed figure on the throne, his brown eyes polite and black hair unruly.

The fairies flitted faster.

“Sir, my name is Chet. This here’s Kamar.” Kamar’s dumbstruck figure stared at the aged nin. “We come bearing news of the outside world.”

Chet waited a moment... the glare did not soften.

“Lartas –” he continued.

“What desire do I have for news of Lartas?” a raspy voice questioned the less certain Chet.

Chet shifted and accidentally bumped his blade. He frowned. He wasn’t used to holding it this way.

“Well, you said you wanted to know about the crown,” he turned his attention back to the king.

“I said the crown, not Lartas, and remembering what I say would be wise.”

Chet blinked, but ducked his head. “Begging your pardon, Sir,” he apologized politely, though a little lost.

“My name is Shi’vaac and you will address me as Lord,” the voice grated.

Chet almost started before he schooled his face and stowed the information away. He hadn’t realized that the Fairy King was also the King of the Nymphs. Chet straightened a little. Lord Shi’vaac’s reputation held a certain measure of respect despite his archaic beliefs.

Chet bowed low. “My apologies, your highness. I was unaware of your station.”

Chet noticed Kamar bow, too.

A short silence fell on the clearing as Chet wracked his brain for some way to get ahead with this nin. Chet registered the soft buzzing of the fairies’ tiny wings in the silence. The old nin’s colorless eyes flashed and the white film vanished, leaving a piercing blue gaze surrounded by fewer wrinkles.

“Tell me quickly what it is you came to tell, or I shall lose my patience!” Shi’vaac’s grating voice grew quieter and his eyes narrowed. “I hear the Lemros are not very pleased with the three of you.”

Chet’s head snapped up. “The *three* of us?”

He heard a rustle behind him and a woman clad in dark greens and light browns stepped out from behind a bush. He noted the bow slung over her shoulder and the sword and dagger at her hips. Despite being caught off-

guard, he noted her slight, but well-toned build and brownish-red hair with a measure of appreciation.

“Lord Shi’vaac,” the woman nodded in greeting. “Chet, Kamar,” she nodded to Chet and his companion.

Chet’s thick jaw set in anger at not having known she was there as Kamar greeted her politely.

“News travels quickly to you I see,” the woman addressed the king. “Thank you for inviting me into your conversation,” she said as she inclined her head to the figure on the throne.

“On the contrary, I would rather observe your reactions than let you observe mine.”

She smiled. “As you wish.”

A small pause followed, during which the fairies seemed to pick up on Shi’vaac’s irritation. They rushed toward Chet and the others, buzzing around them in a whirlwind, trailing that eerie blue light. Kamar’s clothes whipped about in the wind the small creatures had stirred, and he broke, falling to his knees. He spewed news out like the little ninny he was.

“The dwarves attacked Queen Sarsetta’s kingdom, and she’s sent for help, but no one wants to face the dwarves and she’s afraid that her kingdom will fall and she can’t do anything ‘cause she’s outnumbered and the dwarves are getting closer to her capital and she doesn’t know what to do and the people are in a frenzy and they’re planning to attack the palace ‘cause they’re angry and they think the dwarves might go easier on them if they do, and... and...” the monologue petered out.

The fairies broke away from Kamar’s near-prostrate figure and returned to their earlier antics. Kamar sighed in apparent relief.

Chet glared at him through the streaks of blue still twirling around him, for giving everything away when they could have bargained for it – though the information he gave was a little skewed, probably by his addled brain. Still, Chet saw the opportunity before him.

My queen will win this time, Chet thought. Perhaps he could manipulate this king, and gain his queen a victory over the vile nymphs. She would be very pleased with him... he hoped.

“Your grace –“

“Lord.”

Chet stumbled a moment, “Lord...Shi’vaac... I could be your agent in the queen’s army. She is weak now, and this could be your chance to expand your kingdom. Let the dwarves and the queen fight each other until they are

weak and then strike both of them. You will gain two kingdoms... to add to your own.”

The face softened, and Chet was surprised to watch all the nin’s wrinkles smooth and his flesh tighten in youth. His hair, however, remained thin and white.

“And what of your friend Kamar, whom you have so flippantly volunteered into treason?”

Chet’s jaw moved as he tried to form words before he realized what he was doing and snapped it shut. The buzzing seemed to grow louder, and Chet squinted to see the nin through the blue streaks that encircled him.

“As your servant, I wouldn’t presume to tell you what to do with him. Do as you wish, my lord.” He mentally wiped his brow. *Close one.*

The fairies stilled in mid-air around Chet.

Chet blinked as his eyes grew accustomed to the lack of blue streaks and his clothes and unruly hair settled. Silver seeped into the old nin’s hair and it thickened.

“Fool!” his eyes flared as he sat up, rigid, and the crown flashed with them, shedding its age. Emeralds and sapphires gleamed against the crown’s brilliant gold glistening in tandem with his silver hair.

The fairies began circling again, but this time, they dodged in and out, attacking Chet. His eyes widened, and he almost drew his blade, but he caught a glimpse of Sheree through the blue trails and noticed her calm form. She didn’t look the type to stand calmly while another man was being murdered. The fairies still played about her, but she didn’t flinch.

“Selfish man, you come to *me*? What do you seek?”

“I seek-“ he caught himself just in time. He had never told anyone what he really wanted.

I must be really off-balance. He’s better than I thought!

“I seek a unified nation of humans,” he recited.

He set his jaw and tried not to flinch as the fairies dove in at him, but it was the strangest feeling. What was this nin talking about? *He had called him here.*

Shi’vaac’s intelligent eyes narrowed to slits as fleshly warmth colored his face. The old codger that had once hunched before them now resembled a handsome king in his prime, ruling from his sun throne. A few moments later the fairies ceased their attack, but they continued to hover, surrounding Chet.

“If that is truly your wish, then I would have you give me a binding oath.” The rasp left his voice, and he spoke in a deep and commanding tone.

“What sort of oath?” Chet asked warily.

“What is your full name?”

Chet straightened. “General Chetin Ryshal at your service, my lord.”

Shi’vaac’s voice intoned, “You will swear, General Chetin Ryshal, that you shall serve me unerringly until I choose to release you of that oath.”

The underlying menace in his voice disconcerted Chet, as he remembered that same tone in another with dread, but he hesitated.

The fairies’ demeanor seemed to change, and a few landed on his body while the others continued to hover. He jumped as he felt a prick in his back, and quickly turned to see what had done it. He peered down at a male fairy, whose dagger was drawn and pointed into his flesh. The fairy’s surreal eyes glared back with vehemence.

Chet tried not to let the unsettling feeling at the nape of his neck get to him. His anger flared and he clenched his fists in an effort to conceal his anger; this was no voluntary oath.

He faced the Nymph King, the defiance plain in his eyes and his voice. “I swear.”

“What do you swear?” The nin’s voice still held the same quietly menacing tone. Chet didn’t turn to look, but he heard the sound of a dozen tiny daggers being drawn.

“I swear to serve you unerringly until you release me,” he said through nearly gritted teeth.

Shi’vaac turned to Kamar and his expression softened slightly. “And your full name?”

Kamar’s eyes and mouth were open wide – as Chet suspected they had been throughout the exchange. Kamar closed his mouth abruptly, and shook his head. Chet watched in bewilderment as Kamar shed his character of wandering oblivion and straightened with the air of a commander.

“My name is Captain Kamar Terán. I would be honored to serve, Lord Shi’vaac,” he nodded.

Chet had never seen Kamar act more than a buffoon, aside from his adeptness in battle. He was always like a frightened youth, wandering aimlessly in life. Where was this coming from?

“That will do,” Shi’vaac almost said to himself. “Leave me!” he commanded, his voice resounding throughout the clearing.

The fairies broke off from the figures in a seeming explosion of blue, returning to their earlier antics as though nothing had happened.

Kamar's emboldened character fled in the face of the lord's fury. He turned and bolted for the forest. Chet didn't particularly want to stay here any longer either, and took off running to catch up with Kamar.

* * *

"A pleasure, as always, Lord Shi'vaac," Sheree bowed toward the lord as Chet and Kamar ran for their lives. Her eyes widened when she looked back up.

Another figure had materialized out of the throne on the left, and a beautiful olive skinned nina (female nymph) sat upon it.

"Lady Ni'tath," she nodded to the nymph. "To what do I owe this unusual encounter?"

"Sheree," the nina acknowledged and nodded, her long dark brunette hair falling slightly forward under the delicate silver crown. Ni'tath regarded Sheree with vibrant green eyes.

"You would do well to watch that man."

Sheree's brow furrowed, and she opened her mouth, unsure what the always-cryptic Fairy Queen meant, but Ni'tath's steady gaze had already been assimilated back into her throne, leaving the chair empty. She glanced to the other throne, but Shi'vaac had disappeared as well.

Sheree sighed, but filed the message away, making special note. The Fairy Queen rarely gave "advice," but when she did, one would do well to heed it – if able to determine its meaning. Once the memory was carefully noted, she left the fairies to frisk about in their seemingly happy abandon.